An Integrated Collaborative Framework for Equitable Tourism Stakeholder Participation in Namibia

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Abstract: This paper proffers a comprehensive four (4)-stage model framework that is free from prejudice or discrimination but supports and promotes equitable tourism stakeholders' collaboration and participation in Namibia. The framework is, however, developed with an orientation to the challenges tourism stakeholders face when participating in policy and decision-making processes. A qualitative research method was employed, and semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 purposively sampled stakeholders from the Ministry of Environment, Forestry and Tourism (MEFT), Namibia Tourism Board (NTB), Hospitality Association of Namibia (HAN), and Emerging Tourism Enterprises Association (ETEA). The study results showed that some stakeholders experienced exclusion from decision-making and policy formulation initiatives, leading to resentment towards some tourism stakeholders. This resentment hinders valuable collaboration amongst strategic tourism stakeholders within Namibia. Consequently, the study has implications for tourism policymakers and other stakeholders to strengthen the industry using an integrated framework of collaboration that encourages cooperation and harmony among the stakeholders involved. This study contributes to existing and new literature by exploring effective stakeholder frameworks that should enhance policy coherence, create amicable decision-making processes, reduce conflict, and heighten support for tourism growth in other Southern African countries.

Keywords: *Stakeholder Collaboration; Framework; Tourism Stakeholders; Equitable; Participation.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Tourism in Namibia has become one of the most effective industries that has sustained its socio-economic growth over the past few years (Namibia Tourism Board-NTB, 2016). The tourism industry is included in Namibia's National Development Plan (NDP 5) and the Harambee Prosperity Plans (HPPs) as a momentous sector through employment creation, poverty decrease, and foreign income generation (MEFT, 2022). International tourist arrivals to Namibia have illustrated a consistent upward trajectory since independence, with the highest tourist influx of 1,595,973 recorded in 2019 (Tourist Statistical Report, 2022). Notwithstanding an increase in international tourists, they chose a country with the world's oldest desert (the Namib Desert) as their preferred destination. There is a determination to understand the relationship, authority, and accountability among tourism stakeholders and policymakers in Namibia. Malan (2019) states that the predominant tourism developmental challenge facing Namibia is reaching equitable stakeholder participation in and ownership of the tourism industry. However, there is an attitude of division between tourism stakeholders in Namibia, which has brought about institutional inequalities. That being so, to achieve a level of inclusive collaboration gratification among tourism stakeholders in their pursuit to fortify tourism in the country, an integrated collaborative framework that incorporates every tourism stakeholder's participation is to be explored. Stakeholder collaboration is gradually acclaimed as essential in the promotion of tourism (Nyanjom et al., 2020). Similarly, Taufik et al. (2023) noted that stakeholder collaboration builds inclusive cooperation and alliance among diverse stakeholders. In support, Makhaola & Porches (2017) added that this collaboration promotes the sharing of tourism resources, responsibilities, and joint efforts in developing, executing, and managing tourism initiatives. Stahl & Maznevski (2021) describe collaboration as a means by which two or more organisations or individuals work together to attain the intended goals. Thus, collaboration is a system of combined decision-making between independent and main interagency stakeholders, such as the MEFT, to resolve and manage the domain problems of the NTB.

Rogerson and Lisa (2017) regard collaboration as a necessary instrument to help minimise long-term costs resulting from resentment and other indifferences between relevant stakeholders. Consequently, this study aims to fill an existing research gap for further research by developing a

robust and functional model framework for tourism stakeholders involved in this current study. As well as adding to the growing knowledge of the importance of stakeholder collaboration. Furthermore, this study contributes to existing and new literature by exploring effective stakeholder frameworks that should enhance policy coherence, create amicable decision-making processes, reduce conflict, and heighten support for tourism growth in other Southern African counties.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

> *Stakeholder Theory*

The study adopted the use of the stakeholder theory to help formulate an integrated stakeholder collaboration framework in Namibia. Since the integrated stakeholder framework development procedure involves more input from a variety of stakeholders to accomplish, the theory was putative in this study. The stakeholder theory is prominent in business ethics, and its relationship arises between the organisation and its subordinates (Freeman, 2014; Schaltegger et al., 2019; Baah et al., 2021). Conversely, Richter and Dow (2017) indicated that the concept of stakeholder theory's prolonged history is stretched over various disciplines. Alonso et al. (2018) further extrapolate that the stakeholder theory describes the relations between organisations and associations in the tourism context as related to tourism development planning (Miles, 2017). Additionally, the theory contends that each stakeholder with genuine interests ought to acquire benefits and opportunities without taking advantage of another stakeholder (Pinto, 2017). Moreover, the stakeholder theory's application in this study will help develop a framework that assesses the influences and interactions of stakeholders by linking the industry's developmental goals and those of the management (Donaldson and Preston, 1995). Thereupon, Freeman's theory firmly accentuates the impact of partnerships among stakeholders in achieving the envisioned goals (Bricker & Donohoe, 2015). As Palmer & Chuamuangphan (2018) point out, the theory underscores the significance of comprehending and appropriately acting in response to the concerns of relevant tourism stakeholders.

> *Tourism Stakeholders and Diversity in Namibia*

Stakeholders have a crucial role to play in the evolution of tourism in Namibia. Even though stakeholders differ in multiplicity, opinions, expertise, approaches, passion, frequency of engagement, etc., these differences are fundamental to any organisation (Lane & Maznevski, 2019). Namibia's opulent cultural diversity offers a source of erudition and constructive teamwork among stakeholders by creating a value capacity for tourism development (Stahl & Maznevski, 2021; Muulila, 2022). Cultural diversity is defined as the representation of distinct cultural and ethnic groups in society that encourages an environment of inclusion regardless of ethnic backgrounds (Darby, 2024). Nevertheless, a culturally diverse stakeholder working environment should acknowledge and respect the different ideas, experiences, skills, and knowledge that different stakeholders bring along (Taras et al., 2019). Likewise, Tjimuku & Atiku (2024) uphold that stakeholder incorporation stresses the importance of establishing a comprehensive work environment that promotes dialogue, teamwork, and solidarity between various stakeholders. Akintayo et al. (2020) claim that stakeholders

become strongly motivated and engage actively, thus contributing immensely to organisational solutions to issues arising when they are engaged and appreciated. In consequence, Namibia's unitary approach to diversity should be unequivocally embedded in tourism stakeholders' involvement to ensure that there is mutual respect, empathy, trust, harmony, and information sharing sans discrimination or bias (Malan, 2019). In contrast, it is laudable that cultural multiplicity nurtures efficient and operative stakeholder collaboration in tourism, though it can be the cause for misunderstandings and resistance, thereby attracting challenges that will inhibit smooth stakeholder functioning (Wanner & Pröbstl-Haider, 2019; Mitchell et al., 2022). On the other hand, cultural diversity is said to influence stakeholder engagement practices and results aside from other classes of diversity (Taras et al., 2019; Lane & Maznevski, 2019). However, it is unfortunate to note that racial inequities in Namibia are still ingrained in this modern-day tourism industry due to apartheid and colonisation residues, which are still trapped within the society. Similarly, Harilal & Nyikana (2019) highlighted that the same was true in South Africa's setting, where apartheid policies excluded the mainstream of the Black population from partaking in the tourism economy strata.

III. KEY TOURISM STAKEHOLDER IN NAMIBIA

The key tourism stakeholders in Namibia include; the Ministry of Environment, Forestry and Tourism (MEFT), the Federation of Namibian Tourism Associations (FENATA), the Tour & Safari Association of Namibia (TASA), the Emerging Tourism Enterprise Association of Namibia (ETEA), Namibia Wildlife Resort (NWR), the Namibia Tourism Board (NTB), and the Hospitality Association of Namibia (HAN), and these are the mainstream stakeholders in the management and evaluation of tourism changes in Namibia.

Murima and Shereni (2023) proposed that MEFT, as the main government stakeholder at the senior technical and political echelon, needs to present an applicable and equitable framework that decentralises decision-making at managerial levels. Wherefore, to promote the Namibian tourism industry sustainably, the MEFT must play the role of a policymaker, regulator, and enabler in organising synergies among other sub-stakeholders to encourage and promote sustainable tourism (MEFT 2022; Taufik et al., 2023). According to Pretorius et al. (2024), the power of collaboration and the shared vision are vital in unlocking the true potential of Namibia's tourism industry. Thus, stakeholders should participate actively in legislative processes and advocate for policies that foster sustainability (Makhaola and Porches, 2017). Namibia ought to establish a practical and comprehensive network for all stakeholders to breed and maintain good collaborations within the sector (Mitchell et al., 2022).

Likewise, to build successful relations, both the ministry and its stakeholders must base their relationship on trust, equality, mutual understanding, and respect (MEFT, 2021).

Gori et al. (2021) claim that the relationship concerning both the public and private tourism organisations is presumed to advance growth in the industry through skills and information transmission from any participating stakeholder to have commonality (Airey, 2015). Makhaola and Porches (2017) mentioned that tourism necessitates strong collaboration initiatives across all tourism and non-tourism stakeholders. The existence of diverse tourism participants allows the inclusion of different forms of expertise and insights that give significance to both seasoned and emerging stakeholders (Folke et al., 2010; Basurto-Cedeño and Pennington-Grey, 2018).

IV. TOURISM STAKEHOLDER COLLABORATION

According to Bhatta (2019), major tourism stakeholders comprise governmental and parastatal organisations, local communities, tour operators, tourists, tourism entrepreneurs, and NGOs. Tourism stakeholders are described as individuals or groups of people with significance in shaping and formulating policies for the growth of tourism (Yoon, 2019). Grey (2019) defines collaboration as a method of making decisions among stakeholders of a particular field that includes the sharing of different ideas of various stakeholders (Jamal & Getz, 2020). Van Niekerk (2018) stresses that the responsibility of the public stakeholder is to establish and maintain a positive environment based on partnership, team building, and community relationships. And so, this is to guarantee effective tourism growth that is carefully planned and monitored (Mena, 2014). Stakeholder participation and engagement essentially accommodate stakeholder inclinations and thoughts, especially in the tourism industry (Jakhar et al., 2019). Then, equitable stakeholder collaboration will instill an understanding of the industry and its impacts. Tourism policy and decision-making processes are not always smooth, so there is a need to determine appropriate stakeholders' stages of engagement to avoid conflicts (Airey, 2015:251; Monwabisi, 2021). Still, stakeholder collaboration facilitates a dynamic and flexible process that aids in attaining shared benefits and values alongside solving tourism issues and challenges in the management context (Jamal & Stronza, 2009). Daniels & Tichaawa (2021) noticed that tourism recovery and resilience can be improved when different stakeholders work together by drawing up and effectively implementing the policies (Pyke et al., 2021). According to Saito and Ruhanen (2017), stakeholders have no equal strength of power and effect in collaborative undertakings or decision-making, with some stakeholders exerting more authority over others and the process. As a result, this leads to stakeholders having competing interests, contradicting views, and intricate relationships (Jamal & Getz, 2020). Jakhar et al. (2019) are optimistic that effective collaboration may assist organisations by building confidence among stakeholders, but then, it can be influenced by distinct factors that include trust, ethnicity or cultural backgrounds, financial acumen, and expertise of the members (Palmer & Chuamuangphan, 2018).

V. METHODOLOGY

This study was qualitative research and used a non-probability sampling technique in choosing the respondents. Nieuwenhuis (2019) opines that qualitative research is interpretive and concentrates on obtaining meaning and interpretation while developing theories and concepts. The purposive sampling method was utilised to select respondents, as they were directly involved in the development of the framework, and their expertise provided valuable insights, knowledge, and information on the matter under study (Miller, 2019). Thus, this study purposively sampled 10 key informants from MEFT (3), HAN (1), NTB (3), and ETEA (3). The data collection was conducted through fieldwork in November 2023, where the respondents gave their thoughts and interpretations on the issue under inquiry (Johnson & Christensen, 2020). Moreover, based on a comprehensive literature review, an interview guide with questions soliciting respondents' opinions on stakeholders' integration in Namibia was employed. The researcher used in-depth and semi-structured interviews to gather information, which was used in developing the frame.

VI. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

A. Collaboration and Integration Amongst Tourism Stakeholders in Namibia:

The thrust of this paper is to develop a model framework that is free from prejudice or any form of discrimination, but which supports and promotes equitable tourism stakeholders' collaboration and participation in Namibia. The framework is developed in alignment with the challenges faced by stakeholders when collaborating and participating in policy and decision-making processes. In consequence, a theme was created from the respondents' narratives, which were identified and examined based on the interview questions formulated. The question concerning the inclusive involvement of tourism stakeholders was probed. One of the respondents mentioned that:

"The Namibian forum feels that there are racial inferences to tourism, and some stakeholders feel excluded. For example, there are clashes between HAN and FENATA, and some aspects of reconciliation have not been fully achieved" (female respondent from MEFT).

This quote indicates divisions among stakeholders, and some stakeholders feel excluded due to ethnic influence or discrimination. Harilal & Nyikana (2019) mentioned that this type of exclusion happened in South Africa, where prejudicial policies segregated the minority from participating in tourism activities. Patzer et al. (2018) are of the view that, when tourism stakeholders are fully involved in the decision-making process, the results will be more applicable to policymakers.

In support of the first respondent's sentiment, the respondent mentioned that:

"The support provided was rather skewed and selective in favour of white-managed organisations" (Male respondent from ETEA).

The respondent underscored the consequences of racial tensions and differences that have been recognised as an intentional driver of disparities in the distribution of resources, opportunities, and supremacy throughout the entire industry in Namibia.

Winner & Pröbstl-Haider (2019) mentioned that cultural diversity can be a reason for such misunderstandings and resistance. Thus, it poses challenges to effective stakeholder performance. Darby (2024) clearly explained that cultural diversity is the representation of distinct cultural and ethnic groups in society that encourages an environment of inclusion regardless of ethnic backgrounds (Darby, 2024).

However, equitable collaboration is vital in preventing the potential long-term effects of ethnic animosity and divisions among tourism stakeholders in Namibia. This will, however, result in damaging consequences on stakeholder relations during the process of building tourism policies and goals. The findings further revealed that differing viewpoints on authority or power, ethnicity, policies, and the distribution of resources in tourism cause the underlying racial tensions between governmental and private sector stakeholders. However, one of the respondents argued and stated that:

"Collaboration is amicable, and agencies meet quarterly to discuss issues that are brought forward by the stakeholders. Although there are challenges of collaboration that include that the consultation process cannot justify or endorse ideas, the process takes time, and resolutions also take time before they are approved" (Female respondent from HAN).

For this reason, collaboration among stakeholders is indispensable. Nevertheless, a handful of stakeholders may be hesitant to work together because they perceive that this could undermine their authority. Saito and Ruhanen (2017) affirm that some stakeholders may not have the same strength of power and effect in collaborative undertakings or decision-making, with some stakeholders exerting more authority over others in the process, which is inevitable. As one of the respondents answered and said:

"Regrettably, there is a lack of collaboration amongst tourism stakeholders in developing tourism, probably because the majority are in favour of international markets more than domestic markets" (male respondent from ETEA).

In addition, another respondent outlined that:

"Before the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, focus was more on promoting international tourism than domestic tourism, which led to a lack of cooperation between some stakeholders due to the imbalance of support between the two markets in Namibia" (male respondent from MEFT).

Monwabisi (2021) echoes that tourism policy and decision-making processes are not always smooth, so there is a need to establish relevant stakeholders' levels of engagement to avoid conflicts. This assertion by Monwabisi is profound but is refuted by one of the respondents, who mentioned that:

"There are differences in opinions among stakeholders which can also be barriers to stakeholders' participation in tourism development as a result of the absence of a shared vision" (Female respondent from NTB).

The above response indicates that the lack of vision and objectives for tourism development by stakeholders builds up disagreements and creates barriers to effective participation amongst stakeholders. As stressed by Pretorius et al. (2024), the power of collaboration and the shared vision is required in the organisation to unlock the true potential of Namibia's tourism sector by participating actively in legislative procedures. Thus, one of the respondents submitted the above contention by Pretorius et al. (2024) and said:

"The mandate is to create a conducive environment between tour operators and travellers so policy interventions and legal frameworks will be put in place to provide good platforms for engagement for the sector" (Female respondent from NTB).

However, the biggest benefit that can be felt through strengthening stakeholder engagement is gaining support from key organisations to bolster tourism in Namibia. This is a vivid affirmation that highlights the need for a strong collaborative stakeholder framework for Namibia. This, however, aligns with Murima and Shereni (2023), who proposed that the Ministry of Environment, Forestry and Tourism (MEFT) needs to present an effective and equitable framework that decentralises decision-making at managerial levels.

B. An Integrated Collaborative Framework for Tourism Stakeholders

The diagram below in Figure 1 depicts a recommended collaborative framework to be implemented and applied by the relevant tourism stakeholders to reinforce the industry through policy-making integration. The model framework is designed to fill in the gap of a lack of mutual stakeholder collaboration in Namibia by presenting four major stages of the framework that may be used as a strong foundation for policymaking.
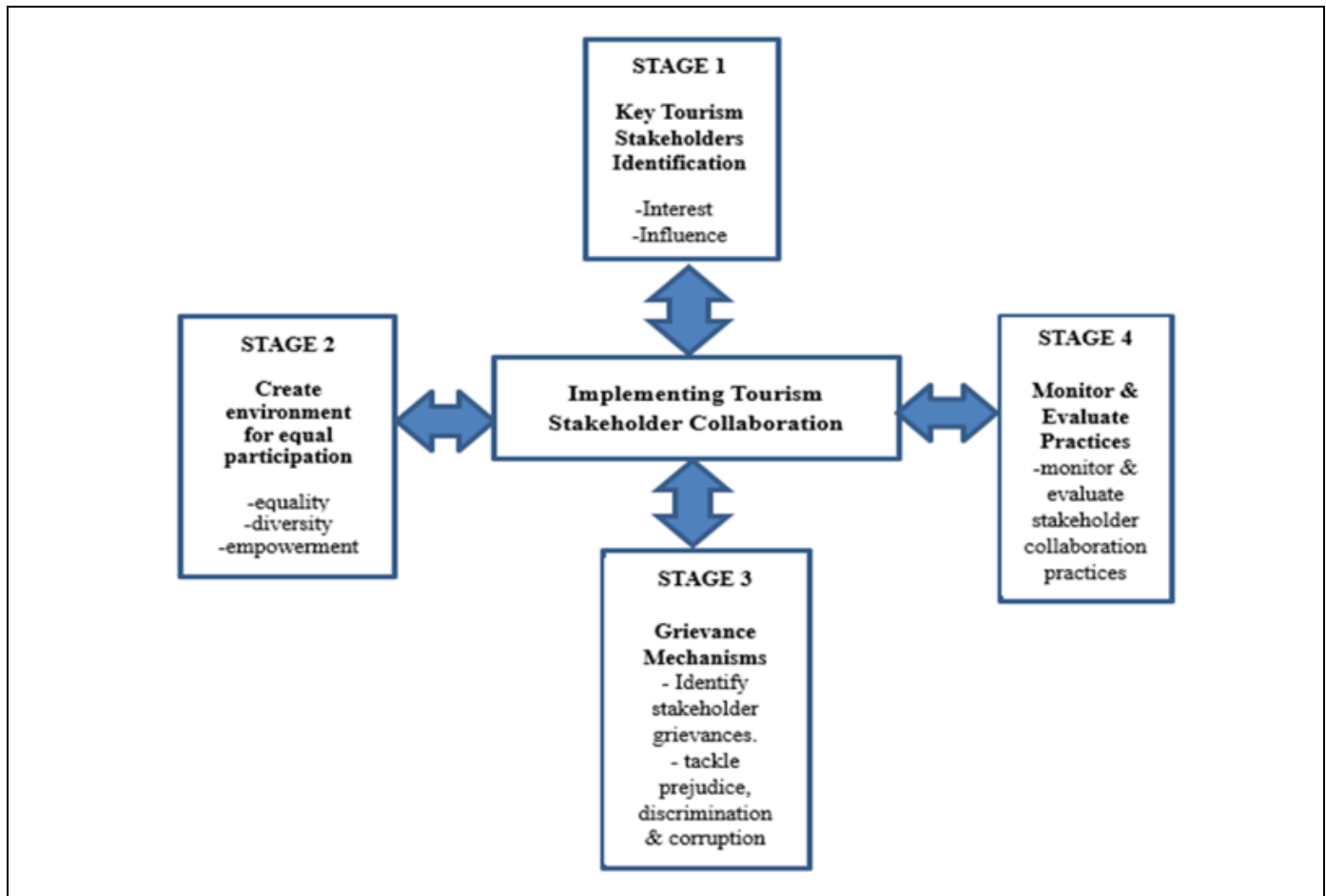
Fig 1 Integrated Collaborative Framework for the Promotion of Domestic Tourism in Namibia
Source: Researcher's Own Construction

➢ *STAGE 1: Identifying Key Stakeholders*

The first stage centers on identifying the stakeholders' participation in the collaboration process grounded on the roles they play in the accomplishment of tourism goals and objectives. In this phase, the influence and interests of tourism stakeholders aim to assess who to accept or reject (Wood et al.,2021). Hence, the purpose of stakeholder vetting at this stage is to have responsible and tenacious stakeholders who drive the industry forward. Emtage (2018) asserts that it is crucial to create an understanding of what the roles and responsibilities of the various stakeholders are from the outset. In support, Mazimhaka (2007) maintains that successful collaboration requires classifying stakeholders based on their skills, interests, influences, goals, and behaviours. However, the process of identifying the key stakeholders in creating a framework is indispensable in ensuring that all relevant stakeholders are represented at all stages of the collaborative process (Freeman, 2014).

➢ *STAGE 2: Create an Environment for Equal Participation*

After identifying the key stakeholders, it is imperative to create a favourable environment for equal participation of all relevant stakeholders. Goeldner and Ritchie (2013) believe stakeholders should be involved in the process without prejudice or discrimination, this is to guarantee that all acknowledged stakeholders express their views and can

contribute to decision-making. Mazimhaka (2007) establishes that collaboration is effective when stakeholders are given the opportunity and capacity to participate in a good environment that empowers them. Tourism organisations need to nurture a realistic and impartial decision-making process that enables and creates a conducive environment to encourage equal participation among stakeholders (Nyanjom, 2020; MEFT, 2022).

➢ *STAGE 3: The Grievance Mechanism*

This stage ensures that all grievances and complaints by the stakeholders regarding the decision and policy-making contributions are examined, thereby assuring that corrective actions are taken. Ali et al. (2017) noted that grievance mechanisms provide a beneficial platform for affected tourism stakeholders so that they can engage with the relevant ministry and other organisations on perceived incidents, complaints, or problems faced. This mechanism is designed to address potential fissures in Namibia's tourism policies and procedures (Malan, 2019; Taufik et al.,2023). Thomson et al. (2017) insists that the collaboration process may be hindered by problems related to inconsistencies in accountability at some organisations. Nonetheless, identifying and responding to grievances supports the development of progressive collaboration between affected stakeholders and other stakeholders (Ali et al., 2017). Caffyn and Jobbins (2003) are adamant that grievances are an indication of developing stakeholder concerns whether

actual or perceived and may increase if not identified and resolved. As a result, the acknowledgment of grievances is a necessary component in stakeholder collaboration that results in the execution of appropriate courses of action to help develop the industry.

> *STAGE 4: Monitoring and Evaluating Practices*

At this final stage of the tourism stakeholder collaboration framework process, it is important to consistently monitor and review stakeholders' work in progress. Monitoring is an ongoing function that intends to support tourism organisations and their stakeholders in continuing the involvement of progress in the accomplishment of outcomes (United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction—UNDRR, 2016). Further, evaluation is described as an exercise that thoroughly and independently demonstrates the attainment of tourism stakeholders' outcomes (UNDRR, 2016). Grey (2019) contends that monitoring and evaluation may yield criticisms that can affect ongoing and future tourism programs. Conversely, this stage provides a chance for stakeholders' performance measurement to support continuous improvement in tourism development. Furthermore, all specified stakeholders' performance should be measured against established targets and goals to maintain excellence and efficiency in performance toward domestic tourism growth (Martinez, 2016). Hence, a survey on stakeholder satisfaction and perception review should be undertaken to help identify stakeholders' demands and concerns. Stakeholder surveys can be effective when generating meaningful information needed for creating and sustaining organisational management and change (Sadashiva, 2015).

VII. CONCLUSION

The study examined the challenges faced by tourism stakeholder collaboration in Namibia through implementing an integrated framework. A variety of issues were raised, and this entailed racial implications that may affect good cooperation, unity, and understanding among fellow stakeholders. Moreover, the study revealed operational flaws in stakeholders' alliances as another major challenge to decision-making effectiveness among stakeholders. However, this study will inform policymakers and other relevant tourism stakeholders in employing the model framework that is perceived to connect and strengthen Namibia's tourism enterprises. Also, it will offer substantial comprehension for tourism representatives, experts, and scholars in a quest to enhance stakeholder collaboration and equitable partnership in the industry. That being so, there is a need to implement a functioning framework that reinforces tourism in Namibia. In this regard, stakeholder collaboration and integration engagements should be revived to help develop a robust tourism industry in Namibia. Though the study was limited to a few expert participants, the results of this study are insightful into the views and thoughts held by key tourism respondents under study.

However, circumspection is required when generalising these results in different contexts. Therefore, the study has recommended a collaborative stakeholder framework that ought to supplement policy coherence, create amicable decision-making, improve collaboration and partnership, reduce conflict, and heighten support for tourism growth in Namibia. Nevertheless, future studies should focus on the resilience and the future of tourism in Namibia with a focus on environmental, economic, and social change.

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